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ABSTRACT

Noting that none of the small number of studies examining false belief performance in low-income children has addressed cultural practices that may help or hinder children's grasp of mental states, this study examined false beliefs from a cultural context, using an ethnically diverse low-income Head Start preschool population. Participating in the study were 36 black and 36 white preschool children with an average age of 53 months. Fifteen of the black children and 18 of the white children were enrolled in Head Start, and the remainder in a non-Head Start program. Children were given a false beliefs task embedded within a narrative: they were shown a wordless picture book, asked to look at the pictures, make up their own story, and listen to the experimenter's story. Afterward, children were asked forced-choice questions about the character's thoughts and the story. Analysis of covariance using language scores as the covariate revealed that black children scored significantly higher on two of the three questions asked. Findings suggested that black children's cultural experience with storytelling contributed to their success in answering questions about a character's beliefs within a narrative context. (Contains 13 references.) (KB)

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The Role of Narratives in Low-Income, Black Children's False Belief Performance

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Paper presented at Head Start's 5th National Research Conference:
Developmental and Contextual Transitions of Children and Families,
Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice
June, 2000

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BACKGROUND

Theory of mind, the study of children's understanding of mental states, has become a popular research area within the past two decades. One reason for the popularity is that children's understanding of mental states has implications for almost all aspects of development, such as pretense (Lillard, 1993) and fantasy play (Taylor & Carlson, 1997), autism (Baron-Cohen, 1995), language development (Astington & Jenkins, 1999), and social skills (Astington & Jenkins, 1995). However, despite the broad ranging implications, the field has primarily focused on White, middle-income children, and has only briefly explored how mental understanding develops in children from other cultures or income backgrounds (Lillard, 1998).

The hallmark of theory of mind is the false belief (FB) task, (Wimmer & Perner, 1993). It tests whether children understand that people act according to their beliefs by asking children to acknowledge that someone believes something false. A handful of researchers have addressed the issue of economic status and FB performance, and in general they have found that low-income children are less likely to pass FB tasks than middle-income children are (Cole & Mitchell, 1998; Holmes, Black, & Miller, 1996; Hughes & Dunn, 1998). The reason why low-income children are less likely to pass has either not been explained (Holmes, Black, & Miller, 1996; Hughes & Dunn, 1998) or has been explained by authoritarian parenting styles which provide children with little insight into other's mental states (Cole & Mitchell, 1998). However, none of the researchers discussed cultural practices which may help or hinder the children's grasp of

mental states, despite the fact that two of the studies (Holmes, Black, & Miller, 1996; Hughes & Dunn, 1998) had adequate samples of Black children.

The purpose of this study was to examine FB from a cultural context using an ethnically diverse low-income, Head Start population. Prior research has demonstrated that storytelling is a valued and common part of Black culture (Heath, 1982; Sperry & Sperry, 1995; Sperry & Sperry, 1996). Given Black children's cultural experience with storytelling they are expected to perform better than their White counterparts on false belief tasks that are embedded in narratives.

PARTICIPANTS & PROCEDURE

Demographic information about the participants is detailed in Table 1.

Children were shown Mercer Mayer's, *Frog, Where Are You?*, wordless picture book about a boy looking for his runaway frog. First, they were asked to look at all the pictures, then they were asked to make-up their own story. Finally, the experimenter narrated the story. Afterwards, children were asked questions about the character's thoughts and memory/story comprehension questions. Questions are listed in Table 2. All answer choices were presented in a forced-choice format which was balanced within and between participants: Half of the children received the answer choices as correct first → incorrect first → correct first (viz., frog or mole → owl or frog → tree branches or antlers), while the other half received incorrect first → correct first → incorrect first (viz., mole or frog →

frog or owl → antlers or tree branches). Children were given 1 point if they answered both the FB and memory question correctly.

Children were also given the language and cognition subscale of the Early Screening Inventory—Revised (ESI-R)(Meisels, Marsden, Wiske Stone, & Henderson, 1997)

RESULTS

A Race x Age ANCOVA with language score as the covariate was conducted. Language scores were used as a covariate because prior research indicates a relationship between language ability and FB performance (Astington & Jenkins, 1999). Results revealed a difference between Black ($M = 1.01$) and White ($M = .44$) children's performance, $F(1,71) = 5.60, p < .05$. See Figure 1. Specifically, Black children ($M = .39$) had significantly greater scores than Whites ($M = .11$) on Question 1 ($F[1,71] = 4.59, p < .05$) and Question 2 ($F[1,71] = 4.93, p < .05$, Black $M = .36$, White $M = .14$), but not on Question 3. See Figure 2. Table 3 shows that over half (58%) of Black children answered at least one of the narrative questions correctly, but only 27% of the White children answered correctly, $\chi^2(3) = 10.62, p < .05$.

CONCLUSIONS

The Black children's success on the narrative questions could be due to their cultural experience with storytelling. From the time Black children are babies they are surrounded by stories and encouraged to tell them (Heath, 1982). Their

stories tend to be imaginative (Vernon-Feagans, 1996) and revolve around social relationships (Sperry & Sperry, 1995). Therefore, when Black children were asked about the character's beliefs, this was not difficult for them because they may be accustomed to hearing detailed stories about people's actions and making inferences about their mental states. Perhaps Black children have a talent for narrative comprehension. If so, this talent could be incorporated into the classroom.

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Table 1. Demographics of Participants

	<u>Black</u> (n = 36)	<u>White</u> (n = 36)
Age	53 months (SD = 8.35)	53 months (SD = 9.23)
Enrolled Head Start	15	18
Enrolled non-Head Start	21	18
Females	20	20
Language Score	7.44 (SD = 2.88)	8.36 (SD = 2.65)

Table 3. Narrative FB Questions

	<u>False Belief</u>	<u>Memory/Comprehension</u>
<u>Question 1:</u>	When Robert first looked in the hole, who did he think might be there, his frog or a mole?	Who was really there, his frog or a mole?
<u>Question 2:</u>	When Robert first looked inside the hollow, who did he think might be there, an owl or his frog?	Who was really there, an owl or his frog?
<u>Question 3:</u>	When Robert was leaning on the long, skinny black things what did he think they were, tree branches or antlers?	What were they really and truly, tree branches or antlers?

Table 3. Percentage of Correct Responses by Race

	<u>Black</u> (n =36)	<u>White</u> (n= 36)
<u>0 Responses</u>	42%	69%
<u>1 Response</u>	28%	19%
<u>2 Responses</u>	19%	0%
<u>3 Responses</u>	11%	8%
<u>Total Correct</u>	58%	27%

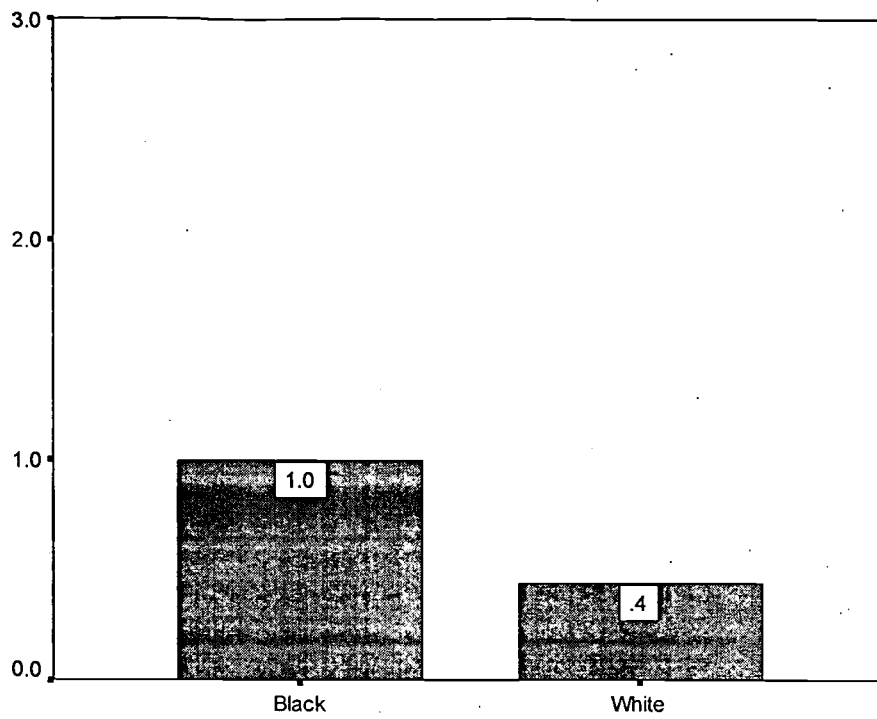


Figure 1. Narrative Score by Race

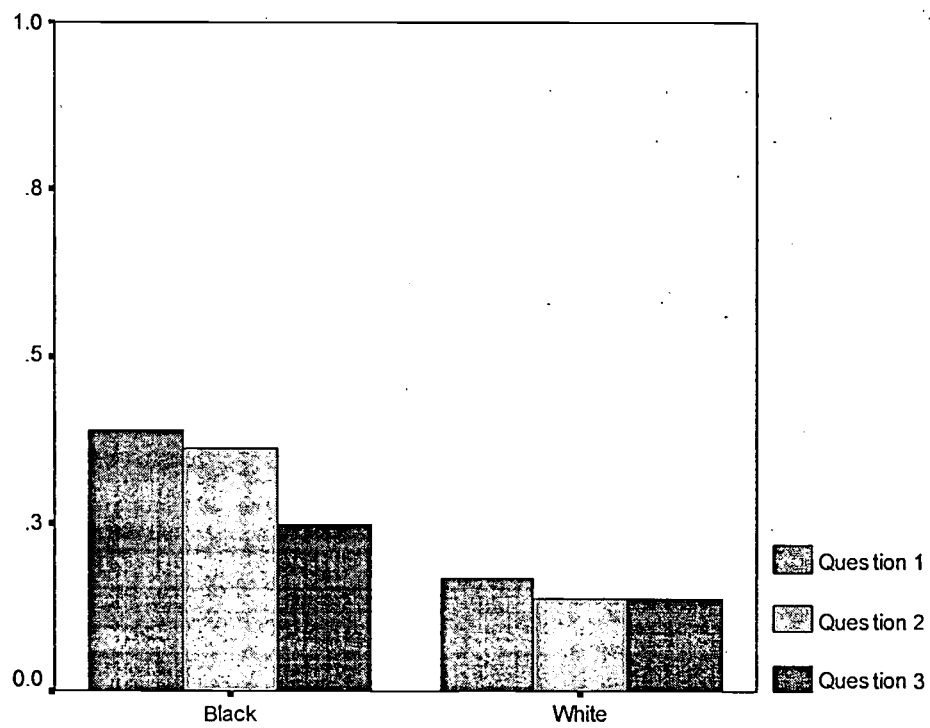


Figure 2. Question by Race



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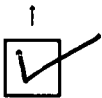
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